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THE GOOD NEWS OF LENT
Matt. 23:1-3,37

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not." (23:37)

Most of us think of Lent in terms of sorrow, ^{a time of quiet} of grief as we think of Christ's sufferings on the cross for us. And that is correct. There is no happiness about a crucifixion, about the innocent suffering for the guilty. But I want to ^{bring you} ~~bring you~~ tonight ^{to} ~~bring you~~ a ~~message~~ ^{message} about "The Good News of Lent."

Let me begin with this question. If I were to ask you, as a pastor, "What is the greatest single obstacle blocking you in your effort to live a fully Christian life as Jesus wants ^{you} us to live it; or if, as a missionary, I asked you what is the greatest single obstacle blocking the world-wide progress of the Christian faith?", how would you answer me? ^{I don't} I ~~know~~ ^{seems to} there ~~is~~ always something that ^{keeps} ~~keeps~~ us from complete obedience to Jesus Christ in our lifestyles, which is why we ^{we all} ~~so often think we must~~ ^{speaking} "give" something up for Lent". And ^I know that there are still immense obstacles blocking the church from fulfilling our Lord's commission to toll the ends of the earth the good news of salvation.

That much is sure. Historians are describing the last half of the 20th century as "the post-Christian era". The fastest growing religion in the west is "no religion". Our mainline denominations are in decline. Ethicists point to a collapse of Christian morality which prompts Billy Graham to say "The new morality is the old immorality". What is causing all this? Whatever happened to the progress of the gospel? What is the greatest single obstacle blocking the world-wide expansion of the Christian faith?

When I first went to China as a missionary I was soon convinced that the greatest obstacle was the Chinese language. I found myself sympathizing with one of the early pioneers who, one frustrating day, roundly declared that the Chinese language must be an invention of the devil to keep the gospel out of China. Well,

LENT

~~we know very well that language is not the great obstacle.~~ ^(It is a physical, not with the great obstacle) In fact from the beginning Christian missionaries have claimed the languages of the world as channels, not obstacles, for the power of the gospel.

When we are younger we tend to think of obstacles in physical, geographic terms--mountains, deserts and jungles blocking the missionaries' access to unreached tribes. But mountains have been climbed, and deserts crossed, and jungles penetrated for Jesus Christ.

In school, perhaps--at least in Christian schools--the great religions are pictured as major obstacles: the powerful and ancient religions of the world which lead so many millions away from the truth in Christ--Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism and so on. Talk to any missionary from a Muslim or Hindu area and you will soon realize how great an obstacle such religions can be.

But I come from Korea, and I cannot tell you that the ancient religions are the greatest obstacle. Confucianism? We have a great Confucian University in Seoul, the oldest in the country. Some years ago it began a search for a new president. The committee scoured the country for a qualified Confucian scholar competent to head the school in the modern age but finally threw up its hands in despair and asked a Christian to become the president of the Confucian University. Confucianism as a religion is crumbling in Korea. And Buddhism? When I went back to Korea as a missionary I found that there was a great Buddhist university there also. It stood on a hill and had thousands of students but when I asked I was told that the largest student organization on the campus of that Buddhist school was the Student Christian Association. Buddhism is declining in Korea. There are more tourists in its temples today than pilgrims. The great religions of the world are not the greatest obstacle. Approached with great wisdom and exceeding care they can become bridges, not obstacles, to the greater truth of the gospel.

What then is the greatest obstacle? A good case can be made that our greatest obstacles may be our own impossible goals, like the slogan, "The evangelization of the world in our own

generation". I know that with God all things are possible, but that does seem out of our range simply because of the physical and social immensities of such a Christian task.

Look at what the population explosion has done to us. The Christian church is growing about as fast as it ever has. Asia and Africa had 50 million Christians in 1900, ten times that many now, 500 million in 1988. What a miracle of Christian expansion! But, there are more than three times as many non-Christians in the world today than there were then: 1 billion in 1900, 3.5 billion in 1988 [Int'l Bull. of Miss. Research, Jan. 1988]. Or take Korea. Korea has one of the fastest growing churches in the world. Korean Christians double the size of the Christian community every ten years. But there are more non-Christians in Korea today than there were when my father went out there as a pioneer a hundred years ago. We are falling behind in the numbers every year. I cannot, however, in good conscience tell you that the population explosion is the greatest single obstacle to the completion of the missionary task. It is at least mathematically possible for each Christian to win two other people to Christ and we would reach our impossible goal. Now I know that salvation history doesn't work out quite so mathematically neat as that, but at least, from that perspective the population explosion is another challenge, not another obstacle.

What then is the greatest obstacle. Until ^{a few} ~~last~~ year, ^{ago} most Americans were telling me that the greatest single obstacle blocking the progress of the gospel is communism. Not any longer. One ~~of~~ the most astonishing missionary facts of our time is that the Christians in communist China, after forty years of persecution and communist revolution, have become one of the fastest growing segments of the church worldwide.

What then is really the greatest obstacle? If it is not language, or geography, or other religions, or the population explosion, or communism, what is it?

Look again at our New Testament text, Matt. 23:37. What city was it over which Jesus was weeping? Was it Sodom? Was it Gomorrah? Was it Babylone, that great and wicked city? No. None

of these. You know as well as I that the city that almost broke Jesus' heart was the Holy City. Jerusalem. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathereth her brook under her wings, and you would not."

There is the great obstacle. Don't look outside. Don't cast about for a scapegoat. Don't blame it all on the Muslims, or the Hindus, or the communists. The greatest obstacle is you...and I. The greatest obstacle is always within.

There is nothing new about this unsettling truth. Amos the prophet made it very clear in ^{the} Old Testament. He listed the enemies of Israel: Damascus and Gaza, Ammon, Moab. But they were not the great enemy. The heart of the problem, said the prophet, was right back here at home in Judah and Israel. Not the pagans, but the Chosen People of God, failing ^{to} keep the covenant, falling short of the glory of God. So also in the New Testament, when Jesus upbraided the cities, he didn't condemn the unreached towns and villages, but precisely those places where he had done his mightiest works: "For if the might works done in you," he told them, "had been done in Tyre and Sidon [or Gomorrah], they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes." (Matt. 11: 20-21)

Church history teaches the same lesson: the greatest enemy is within. Luther saw it ^{at} once. Even in the heat of the battle of the Reformation he had the honesty to say, "I am more afraid of my own heart than of the Pope and all his cardinals. I have within me the great Pope--Self!"

The lesson for us today in all this is that the greatest single obstacle blocking the progress of world Christian mission is right here--in you and me who call ourselves Christians. We are the difference between advance and retreat. When we Christians are the obstacles, the church is in retreat.

What can we do about it? The first step is to recognize in what ways we block the advance. Is it lack of faith, unwillingness to serve, unwillingness to support. Or is it the selfishness of indifference to what happens to the rest of the world so long as we are getting along all right. Perhaps it is lack of compassion for the hungry, or the greatest sin of all, lack of

compassion for the lost? Whatever the blockage, God's great grace is available for all. "Repent", preached Peter at Pentecost, and the Spirit came in power, and people were changed, even the disciples. No longer obstacles, they became the agents of hope.

I think the greatest demonstration of spiritual power that I have ever seen has been in the life story of one Korean Presbyterian congregation. In many ways I have come to believe it is the greatest congregation of Christians in the whole world. They have faced and overcome more obstacles than you can imagine. They have stood up to governments, ^{they have} and been persecuted by communists, they have been ostracized and harassed by Buddhists; they have been battered by divisions and schisms from within; but they have found power and victory in Jesus Christ. They are the now the largest Presbyterian church in the world, one congregation with 60,000 members in the downtown heart of Seoul, Korea.

How could they do it? Well, the story of their pastor might be the answer, but I'll not tell you that now. In some ways, it was the laymen and laywomen who made it possible. There were only 27 of them who escaped from the communists in the north, and found refuge as penniless refugees in the south.

I suppose the story of one of the women tells it all. Like all the others she too had lost everything. To keep alive she picked up pieces of paper and scraps of cloth from the streets, smoothed and washed and ironed them, and sold them for a few pennies. Slowly and painfully, working from morning to night, she began to improve her stock, bought and sold other things, and dreamed of the day she could move out of her refugee shack, ^{with it} cardboard walls and a roof of tin beercans thrown away by the Americans, and flattened to keep off the rain or snow. She dreamed of a real home with a real roof, ~~not beercans~~ where she would be a refugee no more. Saving every penny she finally had enough, and the home she built was a home of which she was very, very proud. Its roof was not flattened beer cans, and not even straw like the homes of many Korans, but of real tile. So she excitedly gathered her belongings together and moved out from under the beer cans into her new home. But that was the day the elders from the Church of

Everlasting Joy chose to call on her on behalf of the church building fund. She was distressed and embarrassed. "I've put everthing I have into my new home. I have nothing left". And the elders, being kind and understanding men, did not press her.

But that night she could not sleep. Early the next morning she gathered up all her possessions and moved out of the new home back into the chicken-coop of a shack from which she had moved so proudly the day before. Then she rented her new home and brought the rent to the elders for the building of the house of God. And that is how the refugees built their great church, the Church of Everlasting Joy, Presbyterian. Today, it not only has 60,000 members itslef, but its missionaries, Korean missionaries fanning out from the congregation have started 350 new churches all around the world, most of them calling themselves by the same name, the Church of Everlasting Joy, Presbyterian.

As we come near the end of Lent, remember the Church of Everlasting Joy, in Korea, for Lent does not end in sorrow, but in great joy. At the foot of the cross, we lose our sorrows, and becme bearers of good tidings and great joy. God sent His Son for us, and Jesus died for us, and His Holy Spirit empowers us, and we are no longer obstacles, but partners with those wonderful ^{Korean Christians} members of the Church of Everlasting Joy in the greatest work in all the world, proclaiming the good news, and discipling the nations.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not."

The good news of Lent is that today, and any day, you can say "I will."

-- Samuel Hugh Moffett
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